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Sherman was Right: The Experience of AEF Soldiers in the First World War

Principal Investigators: Edward Gutiérrez

"At first I could not get angry enough at the Huns to want to kill them," writes Samuel B. Yaffo in 1919, but "after I saw my pals fall in agony from their shells, I did the rest."

Yaffo was speaking of the Germans he faced as a U.S. Army sergeant during World War I. Until Edward Gutiérrez found Yaffo's words, and similar writings from more than 2,000 other Connecticut soldiers in the Connecticut state archives, no one knew that these testimonies existed.

Gutiérrez discovered the texts, responses of Connecticut soldiers to a state-issued questionnaire, while working as an intern at the archives. Since then, over a chorus of archivists claiming to have nothing in their collections like the Connecticut discovery, Gutiérrez has uncovered similar questionnaires completed by soldiers from Virginia, Minnesota, and Utah.

Mershon funds enabled Gutiérrez to travel to each state and analyze all of these previously untouched testimonies. The thousands of questionnaires paint a picture of personal war experiences from minds still fresh from battle. The voices are young, proud, hot-blooded, and patriotic.

Gutiérrez's dissertation will include another fascinating angle to the social history of the Great War: a comparison of veterans' voices from 1919 with more testimonies collected in 1975. Mershon funds supported Gutiérrez on a trip to Carlisle, Penn., where Don Rickey of the U.S. Military History Institute collected 5,500 questionnaires from veterans then in their 70s, 80s, and in some cases 90s.

With age, Gutiérrez found, soldiers had changed. They were often more honest about their thoughts and feelings. "Most,



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with shaky pens and faded memories, expressed one key difference from the men of 1919," Gutiérrez said. "These aged soldiers respected the enemy."

Some even claimed that the Germans were their superiors, a far cry from the despicable "Huns" they spoke of years before.

Gutiérrez's research will become the core of his dissertation, "Sherman was Right: The Experience of AEF Soldiers in the First World War."

The title comes from the questionnaires of approximately 400 veterans who wrote only "Sherman was right" on their forms - referring to Civil War Gen. William T. Sherman who famously said, "There is many a boy here who looks on war as all glory but, boys, it is all hell."

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